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THE STRIKE BEGINS

IN THE TWELVE MONTHS before the strike began the Coal Board had closed 23 pits and destroyed 21,000 jobs. Then on 1 March 1984 they announced the closure of Cortonwood — at just five weeks' notice.

The Cortonwood miners had been told their pit was good for another five years. The pithead baths had just been refurbished, and men were still being transferred to Cortonwood from the exhausted Elsecar Colliery. The NCB had been making a lot of noise about 'uneconomic pits', but Cortonwood was not one of these. According to a report made on the NCB by the Monopolies and Mergers Commission, Cortonwood came only 92nd on the list.

George Hayes, the South Yorkshire Coal Board director, gave an 'official' reason for the sudden decision. 'I selected Cortonwood,' he said, 'because there was no future there, not because it was the most uneconomic pit in the area — it wasn't.'

As George Robertson, the NUM branch secretary at the pit, said, there were several reasons why they picked on Cortonwood. One was that Cortonwood's output matched exactly the cut in production that the NCB wanted to make.

But more importantly, there was the fact that Cortonwood had a reputation as a moderate pit. For several years it had taken workers from other pits that had closed. Cortonwood suited Maggie's purpose and they planned it to provoke us. She thought we wouldn't strike and she thought we wouldn't get support. She was wrong.

The Coal Board undoubtedly believed the men at the pit might

accept the closure without a fight. And the closure of one Yorkshire pit, not through exhaustion, not even for economics, but at the whim of the area director, would be a devastating blow to the union.

More so because the Coal Board had said there was to be no time for the colliery review procedure, the local negotiations between unions and management that had closed so many pits. The closure of Cortonwood was a gauntlet thrown down to the NUM, signalling to NUM Area president Jack Taylor and the Yorkshire executive that they were superfluous to the Coal Board, that they were no longer needed to ensure the smooth running of the industry.

The Yorkshire miners' leaders understood that if they didn't fight now, they never would. No miner would choose to start a major strike in springtime, but the closure of Cortonwood left them no option. Besides, many miners were already pledged to strike because of other moves by the Coal Board over the previous few weeks. At Polmaise in Scotland, miners had been out since February in opposition to closure plans, while in Yorkshire itself four pits were out and a



strike was spreading through South Yorkshire in support of miners at Manvers who had been provoked by Coal Board attempts to sidestep the overtime ban imposed by the union in November 1983.

Sammy Thompson, the Yorkshire Area vice-president, decided that the time was come to go round the branch officials and appeal directly to the rank and file. He began ringing round his old contacts from the 1970s to arrange informal meetings. He told them what was going on in the Area, information that was impossible to get through official channels, and asked them to start pushing among miners at the pitheads for a strike.

On Saturday 3 March, Jack Taylor and Arthur Scargill addressed a packed meeting of militants at Askern. In an impassioned speech, the Yorkshire president said the South Yorkshire strike called in support of Manvers should be extended into an Area-wide stoppage over Cortonwood. Then on Sunday, the Cortonwood branch voted unanimously to call on the Yorkshire Area council, meeting the next day, to bring its members out.

But the strike was no foregone conclusion. Of the eleven pits in South Yorkshire, only four answered the panel's strike call. Flying pickets from these closed the rest. They then converged on Barnsley, where, despite a militant crowd of 500 miners outside the meeting, the Yorkshire Area council took four hours to decide. And when Jack Taylor addressed the miners outside after the meeting, he told them the strike call had been delayed until Friday to allow the delegates time to explain the case against pit closures to their members — something they should have been doing throughout the 18 weeks of the overtime ban!

During the week that followed, the unevenness of militancy throughout the union was to be shown up again and again, with some pits moving quickly towards a decision to answer the strike call while others hedged about. But though the intentions were confused, when it came to action the union went in one direction: forward.

Not all the officials had doubts about how things should be handled. Jack Collins, a senior Kent Area official, said: 'The fight came from the bottom, not the leadership . . . the only tactics we need is to let the men develop the strike.' He argued for flying pickets. 'If the miners are determined to stop work, that determination should be directed not only into their own coalfields but others as well.'

On Monday night Arthur Scargill addressed a rally of Polmaise miners who, just three weeks before, had been told by the Scottish

NUM that they'd have to strike alone. Scargill convinced the Scottish mineworkers' leaders to join Yorkshire and call their members out. Scottish NUM president Mick McGahey promised their action would have a 'domino effect' in the other coalfields. When asked about a ballot he replied: 'We are not dealing with a nicety. We will not be constitutionalised out of our jobs.'²

George Bolton, the Scottish NUM vice-president, declared 'I am absolutely convinced that by early next week we will have a national coal strike. The miners have had enough bullying.'³

The next day the Coal Board presented their plans for the next financial year to a meeting of the three mining unions. Output, they declared, would be cut by four million tons to just 97.4 million a year, the lowest level this century! The **Financial Times** noted that in the coming year it 'is important for the NCB [to] achieve a rapid rundown of capacity and manpower to a level of around 160,000. The present workforce is around 184,000.'⁴

But right-wing NUM leaders seemed more disturbed by the idea of flying pickets than NCB plans. Ray Chadburn, the right-wing Nottinghamshire president, declared: 'If we don't get the thing right there could be a bloody battle.' The right way to spread the strike, he said, was through a secret ballot. The last secret ballot in Nottinghamshire had produced a mere 19 per cent strike vote. Quite simply, those who called for a national ballot either before or at the NUM executive meeting on Thursday 8 March did so because they didn't want a strike.

As miners gathered to lobby the executive meeting, the government announced a massive hike in the severance pay available to miners. 'How much are you worth? Thirty thou? Forty thou?' middle-aged miners asked each other as they waited outside NUM headquarters. If the government hoped it would buy off the fight, they were mistaken.

Militants were angered by the affair. For years the miners had demanded early retirement and decent pensions, only to be told the money wasn't available. Now the money was there, but only if jobs were sold. And with more than 50 per cent of young people unemployed in many mining villages, it wasn't a popular offer.

Miners lobbying the NUM executive meeting took the redundancy offer as a sign that the government could be forced to back down. 'If they're offering this before we've come out, what will they offer when we really hit them' was the feeling.

The national executive meeting voted by twenty-one to only three to back the Yorkshire and Scottish strikes and to sanction action

by any other Area under 'Rule 41' — which allows Areas to call strike action without a ballot providing they have the permission of the union's national executive first. The three votes against were Trevor Bell, secretary of the union's white-collar section COSA, Roy Ottey from the Power Group, and Ted McKay from the tiny North Wales Area. Bell had called for a national ballot, in which he was supported by Henry Richardson from Nottinghamshire and Sid Vincent from Lancashire — but neither of these voted against backing the strike.

After the destruction of thousands of miners' jobs since the Tories had come to office, and three abortive attempts by Arthur Scargill to get the union to stand up nationally to the NCB butchery of the coalfields, the battle was on.

In Yorkshire, the weekend brought elation as branch after branch backed the strike — followed by frustration as branch officials in most pits tried to bottle up and control the enthusiasm of their members. Hundreds of men packed the branch meetings. Houghton Main was typical. 'It was a great atmosphere, 900 men in the room. They called for pickets and hundreds volunteered, but then there was no call for them to all come out and get involved. They were told they'd be contacted when they were needed.'

But at Armthorpe a thousand miners packed the welfare club on Sunday to thrash out what to do. Rank-and-file miners argued that flying pickets should be sent out immediately. Some said the support for the day of action against the union ban at GCHQ had shown there was an anti-Tory mood to be tapped. Others warned that the Tory anti-union laws would be used to cripple a fightback and so should be defied from the start. Above all it was emphasised that rank-and-file miners arguing with other rank-and-file miners stood the best chance of winning solidarity action. If the strike was to be won, the thousand men at the meeting would have to be actively involved and not left sitting at home.

At the end of the meeting just eight miners opposed the flying pickets. This vote in the Armthorpe miners' welfare was to prove crucial.

Yorkshire may have been solid but the other coalfields looked uncertain. In Scotland, branch meetings at five pits solidly backed the strike, but at the rest of the Area's pits there was doubt. The Bilston Glen branch meeting ended in uproar as the branch officials refused to take a vote and instructed their members to join the strike.

Wales too looked doubtful. Out of the 28 pits, 18 voted not to strike. Emlyn Williams, the Area president, who moved the resolu-

tion on the national executive that sanctioned an Area-by-Area strike, was devastated. 'I've never known anything like it in 25 years,' he said. In Durham the majority of branches backed the strike and Tommy Callan, the Area president, warned that 'busloads of pickets' would deal with any pit that remained at work.

The national press on Monday 12 March, the day the strike was to begin, could barely disguise their glee. 'Revolt grows in pits strike' splashed the **Daily Star**. The **Financial Times** declared: 'The attempt to usher in national industrial action has virtually collapsed.' **Breakfast TV** were so eager to confirm the morning's headlines that they announced that Blair Hal colliery in Scotland was working normally. Unfortunately it had closed down years before!

But they had all reckoned without the pickets.

All the Scottish pits were shut on Monday morning except Bilston Glen. There, 300 worked the day shift but just 70 went in on the afternoon as a 200-strong picket took effect. An angry spokesman for the Coal Board's Scottish Area complained that 2,200 men had turned back at picket lines.

In South Wales too the pickets had a spectacular success. Only three pits worked on Monday. A miner at the threatened St John's colliery explained why the men there had voted against striking but stopped solidly when the pickets appeared: 'Until now we'd never failed to back a strike call. Scargill got a 95 per cent vote at this lodge. The men were prepared to come out on strike. They wanted to come out but they also wanted Yorkshire to stew.'

When the South Wales miners had voted overwhelmingly to strike against the closure of Lewis Merthyr pit a year earlier, Yorkshire hadn't backed them. Now it worked the other way.

Maerdy was one of the lodges that sent out flying pickets. As one miner said, the voting was 'a parochial response by rank-and-file miners here. Yorkshire started this strike but they didn't support us last year. I also believe it was a rejection of the Welsh leadership. The rank and file just said "bugger the leadership". When the men went out this morning they found the response was fantastic. When rank-and-file miners met rank-and-file miners on the picket line and the boys got the argument straight, it was a different ball game.'

A panic meeting of the Welsh NUM executive, called to talk about what on Sunday looked like disaster, found the flying pickets had turned the situation round within a couple of hours. As a miner from Maerdy said: 'The rank and file got the momentum up and the leadership caught up with it.' The pickets had saved the strike and were rapidly spreading it across the coalfields.



'HERE WE GO!' Miners after the NUM delegate conference which declared the strike official

